THE HOUSE OF ISSTENS.

By Sir D'Artagan Isstens, Cadet of a Great House, Knight of the Royal Order of Wassmark and One Time Embassador to the Court of Charles I of England.

MADE INTO A ROMANCE BY THEODORE ROBERTS.

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CHAPTER I.

THE TALL ROBBER AT ISSTENS.

For a few seconds I was totally at a loss to know why I was sitting in the ditch with torn garments and bloody hands. Then I remembered the skirmish with the robbers, the hot chase and the stumble. That had all happened by starlight. It was bright morning now.

The ditch in which I found myself was one my father's men had finished digging a few days before to drain off the great swamp of Isstens. There was enough water in the bottom of it to make the seat of my riding breeches decidedly damp and to completely cool my spleen. I crawled stiffly out into the grass, and there to my vast satisfaction found my sword. I took it up, wiped the innocent moisture of dew from the blade and turned to my left toward the great house of Isstens.

It was here in the same house and courts that my ancestors had lived since the very beginning of the kingdom of Wassmark.

All the land, meadow and swamp, rock and forest, to the amount of ten square miles, had been given to one Clare the Isstens by the first king of the country. The word Isstens, a learned doctor once told me, stood in some crazy and forgotten language for swerder or swordsman.

Clare the Isstens, with rock from his own quarries, built the house, and from that day to this whereon I write his descendants have lived in it.

I broke through a shaggy hedge of fir and went up the wide avenue of beeches. Passing a great gate, all ribbed with iron and pierced with musket holes, I entered the courtyard. The main door of the house stood before me ten paces with three shields above it.

The oldest and least skillfully executed of these shields bore a long unwieldly sword and underneath strange letters and marks partly obliterated by rain and sun. The next, which was larger than either of the others and only two centuries old, bore a coat of eight quarterings with the old two handed sword for crest set up on my parents' wedding day. Its gold was hardly tarnished, and its gules and azure blazed bravely. It bore the arms of my mother's family, the great D'Artagans of Normandy.

Can you wonder that Harry, my elder brother, and I were as proud as the very devil?

But I have given the slip to my story, telling all the arms and family history with too much of my native pride. Pardon; I am not yet old enough to be modest.

Upon entering the dining hall I found Harry, Viscount Isstens, in my father's great chair with his head swathed in bandages.

"Hello, Dart!" he cried, speaking as well as he could through the rags. "Half the household is out hunting for you."

I embraced him and sat down to a meat pie that invited me from the table.

"Where have you been, old hot-head?" asked Harry.

"I spent the night in the ditch and got out of it about 12 minutes ago," I answered, hunting about for a decanter.

He laughed as loudly as he could considering his headgear.

"You made a longer run than I did, and it is a pity you did not catch your man. Fact is"—he sighed and rubbed his head—"one of the rascals clubbed me in the avenue."

I am not a man to talk much when I am hungry, but I paused with the wine-glass half way to my lips and asked what the clubbing amounted to. "Nothing but a swollen head and a loose tooth," he answered.

There was silence after that until I pushed my plate away and shoved back my chair.

"We will go out and see the prisoner now; he is down in the cellar," said my brother. I noticed my sword, and as I always like to have it in my room I put it under my arm, so that I might take it up with me after inspecting the captured robber. As we went along Harry talked about the fight. He told how our father had run one of them through behind the stables; how old Pierre had shot another; he wounded one, and Paul and Red Harding caught their leader.

"And the three you went after got away," he said. I grinned soberly at this. "Two of them are bagged sure enough, my Lord Harry," I answered. "The first is in the end of the great ditch, with a sword cut to sleep with, and the second got in the way of a pistol ball at the end of the patch they are plowing up in the swamp."

Harry clapped me on my mud stained back. "You old fire eating cadet!" he cried, his gray eyes dancing. We felt very well satisfied with ourselves, for these robbers were one of the cruelest and boldest bands in the northern mountains, but when we arrived at that part of the cellar in which the prisoner had been bound our joy turned to chagrin. The man had gone—clean as a gray wolf out of a pit.

"Dart, this is a frightful mess we are in," muttered the viscount, "for as sure as death he will have his whole tribe on us hot foot."

"Perhaps he is still near," I ventured. "Let us hunt for him. I will stay here while you get your sword and pistols."

He was used to being treated in this manner, and with a grunt sped off to arm himself. He had hardly left the cellar when the tallest man I ever saw leaped at me over a bundle of fagots. I gave way sharply, for a boy of 20 years is not as cool as a soldier of 20 fights. He cut at me with a club made from one of our own fagots. I ducked my head, slipped and sprawled forward between his legs, at the same time dropping my rapier. The robber tried to spring away toward the passage leading to the courtyard, but I caught his ankle and held on. Down he came on top of me with all his weight.

Things looked very bad for the sprightly D'Artagan of Isstens. But as he stared at me as if not knowing what to do, Harry returned and smote him across the poll with the butt of a pistol. Giving vent to a bull-like roar, the tall man arose, knocked Harry spinning with his fist and escaped into the courtyard.

CHAPTER II.

THE NIGHT ATTACK.

What a rumpus there was when Baron Isstens, the baroness and the servants returned and found us shaken and bloody and the prisoner escaped! Our mother had hysterics before she had done with kissing me, but our father swore a big oath and rushed out to order "boot and saddle." The gaping menservants followed him, and Harry started up.

"My boy, you cannot go!" cried our beautiful mother, her face stained with blood from his bruised lips.

"I have to go, lady mother. I am not hurt," he answered over his shoulder as he ran from the room.

I buckled on my sword belt and clashed home my good blade. "You too?" she moaned. But there was a flash of pride in her eyes that we were both true sons.

"I must, mother, to look after our gentlemen of title, to see that they come to no harm," I laughingly replied. Then I bent (I went a little over six feet even at that age) and kissed the pale upturned face. In another minute I was clinabing into the saddle and straightening my pistol holsters.

Six of us clattered out and down the long avenue. The afternoon was well begun and the air was warm. We saw two of our men carrying a body out of the ditch. It was the robber I had run through on the previous night. We could see a gleam of red sash and metal belt where another lay on the fresh turned furrows. Spreading out into the fields that bordered the road we beat every cover, but no giant mountaineer could we find.

Harry, because of the heat, had pulled the bandages from his face, leaving the blue lump on his forehead and the swollen jaw exposed to view.

When the dusk of evening and the chill mist from the swamp had overtaken us—and not until then did my father order a return—we wheeled silently on the wide road and cantered back toward the house of Isstens.

"We will break up their nest, Dart, boy, as soon as the crops are in," said my father, laying his hand on my knee as we swung along.

"I only want the chance to charge into them," I answered, "but the peasants say that they are many and well armed."

"Yes, and every man of them has innocent blood on his hands and is an outlaw from his country, whatever land that may be, for they come from everywhere, but we are true subjects of our king and noblemen of Wassmark. I think if we call in the foresters we will break them."

He put out his other hand and pressed Harry's shoulder.

Little things like this meant much from the Baron Isstens.

When we gained the courtyard, they were awaiting us anxiously with lanterns and candles. In the hall our mother unbuckled our sword belts. First her husband's, then Harry's, then mine. It was queer to see her pull loose the great buckles and drag the clanging scabbards aside. She was smiling all the while with the joy of our return, and the father stood with a broad grin on his shaven lips, and his eyes following every move she made.

That night we had supper in the little tapestried parlor off the dining hall. There were six of us around the table. My mother sat at the tea urn (rather an uncommon piece of table plate in those days) and my father at the round of beef at the other end. Mistress Sarah Lyons, the widow of an English officer who had been slain in Wassmark, and my mother's right hand in all housekeeping matters, sat beside Harry, and opposite them scarred old Lieutenant Red Harding and your humble cadet. Red Harding was a peasant by birth, but had done such good service as a soldier to the house of Isstens that he had long ago been dubbed gentleman and treated as one.

Though a raid from the mountain outlaws hung over us, we formed a merry party, the baron drawing out Red Harding to tell stories of the woods and people, and the baroness saying all manner of witty things. Mistress Lyons told us tales of England, from which we gathered that the people there are very strong and brave, eat as much as is good for them, drink like Germans and go to church regularly.

We could hear now and then a shout of laughter or a burst of song from the men in the outer hall. Foresters and keepers, shepherds and plowmen had been called in to form a garrison.

We did not tarry over the fire after supper, but retired to our chambers. Harry and I slept in a turret room that overlooked the rear walls and a wide field lying ready for the sowing of the grain. Bare and chill it looked under the white stars.

We were tired and sore, but after throwing off our stiff skirted coats, in which it was our habit to sup, and putting aside our lace collars, we sprawled in the window seat and gazed out.

Here and there glimmered the light of a cottage window. Unlike some landholders, the Isstens gave their people cottages instead of huts and kind words instead of kicks. This was much to our advantage, as you will presently see. We had no light in the room, and Harry, who was three years my senior and had been several times at Blatenburg, the king's city, began talking softly of a court lady he had danced with. I thought this mighty fine, and listened with all my ears. He came to a very touching part. He was saying, "She gave me a little strand of her hair leaning from the coach window, and I kissed her hand three times and swore"—and at that moment we heard a noise that would make the starkest lover swear "blue devils." It was the loud roaring of pistols and muskets and the fierce shouts of men.

We took our swords from their scabbards and a pistol in each left hand and fled down the stairs. The men were arming and rushing forth to support the guards, and my father was tearing about in search of his new horse pistols. Upon entering the courtyard we found Red Harding and a handful of men at the great gate and a few stout foresters with boar spears, thrusting the enemy back from the top of the wall where it is lowest.

"At them!" I shouted, and just then the baron passed me with his dags and two handed sword. We three opened fire on the black heads bobbing over the wall, and then turned to see how things were shaping. The noise of bellowing men and crashing guns was fearful.

"I am glad we have a garrison," said Harry, "and lots of half pikes and boar spears for the plowmen."

I did not answer, for at that moment the great gate was smashed in and a host of burly ruffians plunged through. Without turning to look at them, Red Harding and his men cut and thrust at the ones trying to follow, so wrathfully that they gave way, and up went the oak again with a mighty grindstone and a keg of iron bolts to hold it. Eight fellows had entered, however, and these fought with a dash and fierceness like mountain wolves at bay—with a very good chance for life, too, for our garrison could not spare its numbers from the gates and walls.

Harry raised the family warcry: "The Long sword! The long sword!" and followed by me and a half dozen old retainers rushed at them. There was no loading of pieces in that tussle. It was cut and thrust, dodge and strike, give and take, with hissing breath and muffled curses. I have never been more proud of my brother than I was then. Though pale of face, like a bookman, and more given to writing ballads than bouts with single sticks, he played his lithe rapier blade against their swords and pikes like white lightning. For awhile we stood abreast with our men on either side. The invaders marked our fine linen shirts and powdered hair and yelled: "Down with the fine gentlemen! Down with the fat landholders!" By this hoping to win out peasants.

"And, thank God, they held the land!" cried an old herder.

I got my point into a fellow, dropping him so that the next could get at me. By the saints, the man who took his place was the giant of the cellar. He carried a rapier, and with it in his grip were the air of a man of breeding. We worked back from the others, we two. He fenced like a master, but happily for me he had been pricked slightly in the right shoulder.

"I have the honor of crossing swords with D'Artagan, cadet of Isstens?" he asked.

"The same," I grunted, parrying a thrust in quarte.

I backed slowly. He was certainly my master in skill.

Presently I gained a little. "The chief of robbers, I believe?" I queried with fine scorn.

"Sir Cadet, you are very young and very proud," he said quietly. "I was once a very devil at counting quarterings and riding to hounds myself."

I was filled with surprise at the tone of his voice more than at what he said, for any base born fool can lie about his breeding.

We sprawled in the window seat.

My wrist was tiring when I saw with relief that the members of the attacking party inside the walls were all killed or captured.

"Pray surrender, sir; your men are down," I panted.

He lowered the point of his sword. "I surrender to as brave a gentleman, sir, as ever clapped hand to hilt," and bowing like a dancing master he presented his rapier. Harry and his men came running toward us.

"This is my prisoner," I cried through the clatter and din, "and the man that harms him answers the sword of the cadet."

The men turned off to help at the gates, and Harry said, "Well done, brother," and followed them.

"Where can I leave you? I must back to the fight," I said hurriedly.

"Though I am a man of honor, I beg you to turn a key on me, for form's sake," he replied.

He seemed to take his capture cheerfully. We entered the house and I introduced him to one of the larders and bolted the door on the outside.

Half an hour later the enemy withdrew, leaving the courtyard a ghastly place of blood, silent bodies and broken bill, and the soft dawn showing under the stars. The baron, covered with blood from wounds on his cheek and shoulder, came into the great hall, where our wounded lay moaning and the others rested. He doffed his hat and in his clear voice cried: "Men, I must thank you from my heart. You have stood tonight where the best trained troops in Europe would falter. May God give to all the king's peers as brave a following as he has to me and my house."

He went through the door to the inner rooms amid the loyal cheers of the garrison, and Harry and I turned to follow him.

"God keep the viscount," cried a big plowman.

"And the cadet," sounded a muffled voice from the larder.

CHAPTER III.

THE ROBBER CAPTAIN'S DAUGHTER.

In a few days things had taken on very much their old faces. Five prisoners, being robbers and murderers, were hung, but out of sight of the house. My prisoner, whom we called "the captain," was kept for ransom. So I told the men, but I doubt if I would have let him hang under any circumstances, for he fascinated me strangely. He was prisoned in my chamber and fed from our own table. We took him all manner of books, which he read with pleasure. Harry, who was a wonderful scholar, far beyond anything I could hope for, used to argue with him over Homer and Cæsar, and sometimes they wrote songs together. Then they would have me in to hear the songs, which, I must say, were very learned and not a little uncommon.

The crops were put in and life went on in the cottages and fields, as well as in the house, very much as it had before the great robber raid.

One morning I was seated on a stone bench half way down the avenue of beeches, dreaming of things which the captain's songs had started in my brain, when on raising my head I saw a lass tripping toward me up the road. She was robed in all manner of fine silks, like my mother on occasions, and had white gloves on her whiter arms. Merry golden curls fell down from under the great feathered hat.

"By the long sword, here comes that court lady after Harry," I muttered to myself, and straightway rose and bowed, hand on heart in the latest mode.

She answered with a fine courtesy.

"Are you the lord cadet of Isstens, sir?" she asked, gazing sweetly.

I could see now that her face was wan and her eyes red from weeping.

"I am the cadet of the house, madame, but without a title. Perhaps it is my brother, the viscount, you would see?" I bowed low after each word.

"Nay, sir, it is the brave cadet. I hear he captured my father with his single sword, and took him into the house kindly, as became a gentleman," she said very softly, looking at me with wonderful eyes all the while.

"What!" I cried. "Are you the robber captain's daughter, madame?" And I fell to staring at her like a great frog.

She flushed haughtily at that.

"I am Captain Castletree's daughter—yes. Does it offend your ears, my lord?"

I was confused woefully. "Do you want to take him away, madame? He is very quiet and is helping my brother write verses," I gasped.

The lady laughed merrily at my speech and face.

"I would like to have him, Sir Cadet, but I do not want to [illegible] our brother's rhymes."

I recovered from my confusion.

"Let us talk it over. You know he is a prisoner of war," I said, bowing her to the seat. I thought to impress her with the greatness of the favor she asked, so continued, "The four other captives were hung."

She answered with a fine courtesy.

She flashed her eyes at me.

"Because they were common scum," she cried, "do you think they had no souls?"

"I don't think they had, madame, for they were the foulest rogues and murderers under heaven. The captain is a man of breeding and may not be a rascal, after all. At any rate I have kept him safe, and we are fond of him now."

Her eyes filled with tears.

"Oh, forgive me," she cried. "I have sinned in speaking so to you. May God bless you for your sparing hand."

The tears sprang to my own eyes at the words of her forgiveness.

"It was very little to do. It was a pleasure," I stammered. Then, "May I take you to your father, Mistress Castletree?"

She accepted my proffered hand, and together we went up the avenue and through the great gate of the house of Isstens.

CHAPTER IV.

"DO YOU LOVE HER, VISCOUNT?"

Can you imagine the stir all through the house when I ushered in the captain's daughter, splendid in her silks and sunny smiles? Out came my father and bowed like a gallant of 20. Out came my mother and swept the floor with a grand courtesy. Mistress Lyons cried, "Bless her dear English face!" and kissed her.

Ah, thought I, Castletree is an English name, is it, and I gracefully presented Harry, who could not have come faster to meet the court lady whose hand he had kissed.

I ran and released my prisoner, who came down and received that little form—silks and curls, great hat and all—into his arms with a cry of joy. He told her how kind we had all been to him—a foreign outlaw, a leader of robbers—and we blushed and wished we had been 20 times kinder.

Then the maiden was taken off under my mother's wing, and we men held counsel in the little dining parlor.

"I am clear of the robbers," said the big captain, "and I swear"—he did in English—"that I would plow like a peasant sooner than return to them."

"You are a worthy gentleman, sir," said the baron, "and how you came to mix and fight with such dogs I cannot see."

"That—my reason for it is a closed page of my life," answered the Englishman. "Enough, my lord, that I was once happy in my own castle in Devon, with a sweet wife, honor and wealth, and now"— And he burst into tears.

The sight of a strong man in the agony of weeping is ever a pain to me.

When he recovered himself, my father offered him a position in the household, to make him and Mistress Castletree of the family. My heart rose at that.

The captain looked up proudly. "Can I earn our bread, my lord? Is there work for me to do?"

The baron, who was slightly the elder of the two, took his hand.

"There is work, my friend, for a true gentleman with a true sword in the house of Isstens. Will you swear to be loyal to this family until this family or some member of it is disloyal to you?"

"I swear it on my honor," said the captain.

I slipped out and getting his surrendered sword from my room returned and placed it in his hands.

"Not this sword," he said. "I will purchase a new one from the house of Isstens." And he broke the lithe blade across his knee and handed me back the two pieces.

"It was not the sword I used in the service of my old king. Neither will I use it in the service of my new lord, the Baron Isstens," he said, smiling sadly.

And thus the house of Isstens was increased, and life seemed to be merrier and more worth the trouble inside the gray old walls.

The captain knew a great deal about farming and even more about weapons and the drilling of men. Soon all the people on the estate, including old Red Harding, looked up to him with love and respect, and some of them whispered that he had been a prince in his own country.

Blithely, like red petals blowing from a bush, went the days through May and June. The brigands lay close in their mountain fastnesses, evidently crushed by our brave defense, the slaughter at the gates and the hanging of the captives.

The peasants returned to their work, the foresters and keepers to the woods, the plowmen and sowers to the fields, and the young grain was green over the uplands. Captain Castletree was everywhere. For three days he tramped about in the forests with a squad of axmen marking the lumber to be cut for building and where the underbrush was to be cleared out for firewood. I wondered if he ever thought of the Isstens faget he had tried so heartily to use over my head.

There was a second ditch to be run through the swamp, and the captain marked the best course for it, and even helped at the blasting out of rocks with his own hands. And yet a finer and prouder gentleman could not be found in Wassmark, where it is said the nobility cannot bend to pick up their gloves should they happen to fall.

It did not take me many weeks to discover that I was deeply in love with Mistress Castletree. Her other name was Marion, which both Harry and I thought very pretty. My brother made verses about it and read them to us on the south terrace. Sometimes my heart ached that I, too, could not write dancing rhymes to bring smiles to her lips. I looked at Harry through a green light and said all manner of unpleasant things to him, and for answer he would only eye me and smile.

One day I caught him by the shoulder—we were alone—and cried, "Do you love her, viscount?"

At first I thought he was about to say "No!" but his face changed and he cried: "Fie, fie, my dear cadet! And what if I do?"

"Yes, poor cadet," I hissed. "Oh, but the cadet has a sword, and by all the devils it is not an easy one to get beyond!" With horror at my words I turned away. Quick as a flash he was at my shoulder.

"Don't worry, old fire eater," he said, laughing; "there is some one in Blatenburg, you know." And then he broke off and began to sing. I rushed after him and craved pardon humbly for my hasty words. We went out together and found Marion on the south terrace looking out across the valley with dreamful eyes.

Harry had a slip of paper in his hand.

"Listen to Dart's first poem," he said, the while I stared at him speechless.

He read:

"Sweet of the golden hair
Here to your feet I bring
Sword and heart and hand,
Truer than heart of king.

"Know that the sword is leal
Even till this life is done—
Know that my heart is thine,
Sweetest Maid Marion."

Here the viscount turned and fled, leaving me gazing at Mistress Castletree and she at the sky. Her face was crimson, and I think mine was too.

"By all the little blue devils"—I remembered myself and fled away also.

CHAPTER V.

THE KING'S SUMMONS.

When I found Harry, he was convulsed with laughter, lying on the couch in our chamber. I could not challenge him to fight, so I sprang upon him with my knees and said that I would both write and read my own poems in the future.

When next I met Marion, she flashed her eyes at me in a haughty way that raised both terror and admiration in my heart. She did not go down to her seat on the south terrace for three days after the jester play of Harry's. How to mend matters I did not know, though I pondered over it continually and forgot my sword exercise and all interest in quarter staff. But one night a plan dawned upon me, and I begged Harry to give me the verses. He did so without questioning, and going up to my room I scrawled beneath them: "This is all true; I swear it, though Harry wrote the rhymes. D'Artagan."

Then I put the paper into her silver cup down in the dining hall and went up to bed. Scarcely had I got clear of my boots when in came Lieutenant Red Harding.

"Up, sir, and into saddle for Blatenburg, at the king's command," and off again to find Harry, who was somewhere reading Cæsar. I pulled on my riding boots, changed my silk coat for a leather jerkin with steel breastplate, buckled on my sword belt, and, hat in hand, clattered down stairs.

Harry, Red Harding and I, with 12 horsemen, were to answer the king's summons, leaving my father and the captain with the rest of the men to guard the house.

The mother came out to bid us godspeed, but no Marion; so away we started on the 30 mile road to the king's city. Harry jested so that the men shook till I thought they would roll from their saddles. I did not feel unusually gay, which I think was quite natural. While Harry and Red Harding chatted merrily I rode at the lieutenant's left, silent as the dead. After five hours on the road, which was mud to the fetlock most of the way, the dawn broke in front of us. We dismounted at a little hostel and drained a cup, while the fellows fed our horses a bite and rubbed them dry with handfuls of straw. I washed Hagart's mouth out myself, for he is a fine horse and too good to be trusted to every wayside stable boy.

Before the sun had risen a pale width above the fir trees we were mounted again. Half an hour later we rode into Blatenburg, the king's city, and by the light on the viscount's face one might have thought it was his.

The streets were alive, early though the hour was, and armorers had their forges going—and the smiths, too—for many of the incoming horses had cast their shoes. The great houses, the hurrying people and the bright faces made what seemed to me a wondrous brave sight. Our leader, Harry, took us far into the city, and there ordered us to dismount at a big inn not far from the royal palace. Out of the saddles we climbed, glad enough to be rid of them. Our horses were led away, and we went inside to breakfast. The landlord took us to the highest table, while a drawer hustled our men in to a spread of ham and beer.

"Have you heard anything of the Bohemians?" asked Harry.

"Baron Vossgoff defeated them last night 18 miles to the north, my lord," answered the fellow, with a broad smile.

"Thank God!" we cried, and drained to the health of Baron Vossgoff.

Harry, as our captain and representative of the house of Isstens, must go up and report to the king, but Red Harding and I, belted and spurred, sallied out arm in arm to view the city.

I think we were a fierce looking pair by the way the other soldiers turned to stare at us. I wore gold across my breast and the mark of the cadet, together with the Isstens' crest on my sash, and Red Harding was bravely trigged out with lace and gold, polished brass and scarlet. Though ladies waved their scarfs to us from the windows and balconies of the tall houses and men saluted us in the streets, my heart would not away from the gray house of Isstens.

When we returned to the tavern, Harry was awaiting us. He was most beautifully dressed in satin and lace. Wise viscount to bring his court suit along with him!

It was evening and he bore news of a great fete in the palace and palace gardens, to which all true officers and gentlemen were invited. At this Red Harding, who was something of a blade at heart, pulled a long face.

"By the devils, viscount, can I go in these boots?" he gasped.

The troopers at the door fell to laughing at this. The lieutenant froze them with a stare, and then he went in to supper. But as feasting would be going on at the palace we did not spend much time over the tavern beef.

I had two men in to rub us up—boots, breastplates and spurs—and Red Harding groaned, "If we can't go looking like the viscount, we will go looking very much like the devil."

On our way up the hill, which was paved with marble for foot passengers, Harry took an arm of each and said, "The king has ordered me to stay with him and use my poor brains in his counsels while the trouble lasts and you to take the men and out and use your good swords against the Bohemians."

We saluted. Then Red Harding said, "It is good news, viscount, but it will be strange without you riding and cutting between us."

"True!" I cried; then, "Thank God, I have more blade than brains!"

When we reached the gardens, my rustic eyes were near to popping out at sight of all the lights and gay costumes. We passed into a magnificent hall, and while I was staring about Harry plucked me by the sleeve. There was a tall, ruddy man at his elbow, smiling broadly.

"The king!" whispered Harry.

I dropped on one knee, flapping hat in hand.

"Arise, sir," he said, and, when I was up, "I have heard much of you from the viscount here."

Then he said some kind words to Red Harding and let us go. We followed Harry through the brilliant throng like hound pups after their dam in a new cover.

After parading up three great rooms Harry halted us in front of a young woman in figure much like Marion, but with brown hair and the most roguish green eyes I had ever seen. She was talking with a tall cavalier in red and gray, but looked up with a faint run of color over her brow on our approach.

I nudged Harry, who nodded.

"Ho, ho!" thought I. "So this is our lady of the coach window—our future baroness."

Harry presented us and then excused himself, and, with the grizzled lieutenant on his arm, left me alternately grinning at the lady and glaring at the cavalier, who almost immediately bowed and went also. Then the Lady St. Arnaud moved over and bade me rest on the same seat.

In spite of my sword play, my pride and my great talk of the rights of the cadet (which same, in truth, are no rights at all), I was little more than an unpolished rustic, and this honor nearly threw me into a fit. Marion had never asked me to sit beside her on the south terrace. But the lady was so kind and fascinating, like a rare, bright jewel, that I soon found myself at ease.

Now I will get even with Harry and burn his ships behind him, I thought; so I told her of his little story, which had been interrupted by the raid of the hill men.

"So the viscount kisses and tells!" she said, raising her eyebrows.

"Not always," I answered. "I once saw him kiss my mother's maid, but he didn't tell us about it afterward."

She looked at me gayly. I could see at once that she was painfully sharp of wit.

"You shock me, Sir Cadet," she cried in a feigned voice.

"It shocked me, too, at the time, for the same maid would never let me kiss her," I said.

She looked demurely at her pointed shoes.

"What a strange choice," she murmured, "to let the Viscount Isstens kiss her when the cadet of the same name was within calling!"

I knew that she was playing with her meaning here and that she intended I should know it. So I smiled simply and remarked that she would make

I dropped on one knee, flapping hat in hand.

Isstens a very merry old place. At this she blushed, stared haughtily and waved me off, and upon seeing Harry coming toward me I backed away.

Later, when Red Harding and I were stamping about the gardens, Harry came out and pressed my hands.

"Thanks, brother," he whispered. "I think we are quits now." Then he laughed merrily, as if his heart had nothing more to say, and left us.

The old lieutenant scratched his scarred cheek. "Alack!" he cried. "The viscount and the cadet have ogled the ladies and been ogled most lovingly in return, and the Cavalier Red Harding has not won so much as a smile."

"It is safer so, comrade," I replied, "for a youth is in danger of losing his head before the smiles of women."

Shortly after midnight we left the gay throng, for we looked to be well on the road with our men before sunrise of the morrow.

CHAPTER VI.

THE CAPTURE OF THE STRANGE LADY.

The horses were saddled by lantern light, and we were all mounted before the dawn. At the city gates we joined three other gentlemen, each leading ten horsemen. So together we made a stout little squad of 42 men and five officers. Our orders were to ride until we met Baron Vossgoff, who was expecting at any hour an attack from the second Bohemian army. The roads were better than the ones we had traveled before; so we pounded along right merrily. A few miles out we passed a regiment of pikemen with their officers mounted on shaggy ponies. They cheered as we rode by in the ditch. Before noon we came upon the army, which lay along the crest of three low hills, awaiting the Bohemians.

After reporting to the baron we stationed our men in a goat pasture and ordered the preparation of dinner. The three officers of the private companies we had ridden along with came to our fire. Two of them belonged to great houses in the west and the third was a lowly born, well tested soldier like Red Harding. While we devoured our Spartan fare and told of past adventures we watched company after company of horse, foot and artillery creep along the road and take up position to right and left. We were down a little from the main body of the army, with a thicket of birches in front of us, but presently came noise of a disturbance and rumor that our scouts and out pickets were riding in, many of them wounded. Then the bugles began all along the line, fiercest on the hill to our left, where most of the cannon were planted.

Red Harding filled a flagon with wine to the brim and got to his feet.

"My lords, as the oldest officer in our circle, with most scars on my body, I pledge the war cup. To our country and our king! To the glory of the houses we serve and to ourselves!" he shouted, and, tipping the cup, drained it.

Nothing about "To the glory of God and the saints," which is but a poor excuse for blowing out men's brains and cutting off their heads; but we lifted our swords and swore to fight like loyal men, and the troopers cheered.

No sooner were we in our saddles than the guns of the enemy began to pop and our cannon and culverins to answer. A richly accoutered cavalier rode up and saluted us. We saluted in return with drawn swords.

"The general's compliments, and he begs you to fall in behind De Audrey's lancers on the left of the prince's dragoons."

Here was honor, for these were the picked horsemen of the kingdom. We saluted again, and he rode on.

"Though we are free companies, under none but God and the king," cried I, standing in my stirrups, "let us make Viscount Von Brum our colonel till the fight be over, that we may wheel and charge with one mind."

The others agreed, and Von Brum thanked us and rode to the head of the squad.

We found De Audrey's lancers and took up our position without delay. There were so many broad backs and big spears in front that I could see no more of the enemy than if I had been home at Isstens, but hearing them was another matter.

Our 40 fellows were armed with swords and pistols and a few with carbines. I had the baron's horse pistols in my holsters and my rapier in place of a saber. Red Harding wore his broadsword and carried a blunderbuss across his saddle. He told me it was loaded with 20 leaden slugs and grinned pleasantly.

"It will kick very hard," said I.

"Yes, unless it has changed mightily in its habits; but I am used to it and will brace my horse before I let fly," he answered. Our new commander looked over his shoulder at the piece in some concern.

"You will please refrain from letting it fly into my back, lieutenant," said he.

Red Harding chuckled and answered him that it was safe not to go off before the fourth drop of the hammer.

I am unable to do justice to a battle, so I will let this one pass with only a little ink spilling.

We charged over the hill, keeping together as well as we could. The lancers drove at the horsemen in front of them, and it was a long time before we could get into the fight. When we did, Red Harding fired his old gun and blew himself almost over his horse's tail. He scrambled forward into his saddle again, however, and charged with the rest of us. There was a great deal of smoke and more noise. A pikeman reached my thigh, but I beat him down and leaped Hagart over the body and so gained the inside of the square of footmen. We had a warm and merry time in there, I can tell you. A big captain on a white horse was hammering against me. He swore in pure German and shortened his sword to run me through. But he did not make allowance for my wrestle, so I smote him from the saddle with an [illegible] thrust.

Before evening the Bohemians were broken utterly and running frantically for the woods. Not many of them got away, for our light horse followed and cut them down as they fled, cheering as if it were as much sport as the English fox hunting. When Red Harding and I counted our men, we found eight left of the 42 who rode out of Isstens, and all those, like ourselves, suffering some wounds. It had ever been thus with our peasant soldiers—let the gentlemen lead on and the lighter the chance of battle the happier for them. They wiped the sweat from their faces and shouted, "The king, the king, and the long sword of Isstens!"

We built our fires on the battlefield and lay down to rest. Before we could dawn twice along came a cavalier splendidly attired and said that the broken army would play the devil with the villages further on if we did not interfere.

"I will see to it," I said. We devoured our frugal meal like wolves and then got about saddling our tired horses. Hagart was without a scratch, but some of the men had to catch fresh mounts. As we went slowly across the trampled fields toward the highroad Red Harding grumbled away under his mustache like a sulky hound.

"By all the beer mugs of Germany, what ails you?" I asked.

"I have lost my gun, and how in the name of heaven are we going to guard these sheep of villagers without it?" he muttered.

This after the heat of the fight set us all laughing till the tears trickled down and washed white streaks in the blood and dust.

Going slowly along the trodden road under the mist my thoughts went back to the English Marion in the house of my fathers.

I shut my eyes, and there she was before me, lovely as I had seen her on the first day, all clad in silks and thinness. I wondered what her heart said when she found the verses with my postscript in her silver cup. How beautiful she looked when Harry was reading those same verses! And Harry,

A pikeman reached my thigh, but I beat him down.

the learned rogue, what havoc he must be making in the hearts of the court ladies, I thought.

I was roused from my reveries by Red Harding, who tapped my thigh.

"What are the lights ahead?" he asked.

"I was just wondering," I answered (a man must lie sometimes). "Let us spur on and find out."

We put our horses to the gallop, whirled down upon a little wayside inn, a crowd of soldiers, a coach, servants and lanterns.

A young woman was speaking haughtily from the coach window, and a crowd of rascals were hanging to her horses' bridles. A tall man in cloak and hat answered her from the road.

"What the devil does this mean?" I asked, riding up to the coach.

"It means," said the lady, "that these rogues—the canaille of Bohemia—will not let me pass. They have taken my money, killed my servants, and now they want my horses."

I looked at the men. They were fellows from my father's farms and stables. I looked at the man in the cloak. It was Captain Castletree.

"I think you are mistaken, madame," I said, bowing to her. "These are peasants from Isstens, and this gentleman is an English captain."

But in spite of my cool voice I was sorely puzzled, having left them all safe at home.

The lady bit her lips and withdrew her head from the window.

"Take out the horses," commanded the captain, "and set a guard on the coach, but no rudeness, men, or you walk up to the bilt of this sword."

Then he uncovered to me and with his rare smile asked me to come in.

It was a strange tale the captain had to unfold, of a message hot from the pen of a friendly German count, saying that a lady of degree was posting through the country with a letter for the king of Bursar, full of lies, to set him at our throats as a wild geese, and at last this capture within sound of the great battle.

"This is the letter," he said in conclusion, handing me a sealed paper.

I returned it to him. "We will take it to the king, my dear captain, and I think it is as safe in your keeping as in mine." Whereat he put it back in his breast and waved off his wine.

"We will take the lady, too, in her coach and seat," I added. "If you will place the men in front and behind, I will ride inside with her notwithstanding and see that she plays no tricks."

"All right, comrade," he said, and we went out to our men.

Walking up to the coach, I opened the door. The lady was seated in the corner with her face in her hands.

"Madame," I stammered, "owing to circumstances it is my duty to come inside and ride with you to Blatenburg."

I stepped in and closed the door. I could hear the lady sobbing and through the window Castletree and Red Harding snapping out commands. Presently the coach jerked, the driver